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ABSTRACT

Two themes which run through a majority of education reform reports are the need better to prepare teachers for cultural diversity and to forge partnerships between universities and public schools. In an effort to fill these needs a collaborative project was undertaken between the University of Central Florida and a local elementary school (in Seminole County) in which 80 percent of the students were from families living at or below the poverty level, and 80 percent were of minority status. The purpose of the working partnership was twofold: (1) to provide the school with teacher education student interns; and (2) to offer future teachers the opportunity to begin studying the problems of educating at-risk students. Interns tutored individual students, worked with small groups, and in some cases, conducted units of study in classrooms. In addition, they kept personal journals to encourage reflective thinking and accentuate personal attitudes, beliefs, and affective reactions to classroom experiences. Analysis of interns' writings suggested overall positive outcomes for both the interns and the elementary students; however, the student teachers expressed frustration at their lack of prior experience with diversity. The report concludes with 13 major themes identified in synthesizing student reactions, and a suggestion that a field-based approach wherein future teachers are immersed into a culture different from their own is likely to develop a new appreciation and awareness of students as individuals and an understanding of the importance of diversity to a quality learning environment. (Contains 15 references.) (LL)

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Cultural Diversity and Collaboration:

Educating Teachers for the Future

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Cultural Diversity and Collaboration: Educating Teachers for the Future

Abstract

Two themes which run through a majority of the education reform reports are the need to (1) better prepare teachers for cultural diversity and (2) forge partnerships between universities and public schools. This article describes a collaborative project between a college of education and an elementary school in which future teachers were placed on the elementary campus. The results of this research indicate positive outcomes for both the university and elementary students.

Cultural Diversity and Collaboration: Educating Teachers for the Future

Few institutions receive more attention than the public schools. For the past several years, much of this notice has been in the form of reform reports. Two themes which have been identified by a majority of the reports are the need to (1) more effectively teach students from culturally diverse backgrounds and (2) forge partnerships between colleges of education and public schools.

Cultural Diversity

With the increasing percentages of minority children in school classrooms, a greater emphasis on diversity is paramount in public education. Today, more than ever before, classrooms represent multiracial, multicultural, and multiethnic backgrounds. This forecasted diversity has emerged already in many schools where the parade of nations takes place daily (Horn, 1992). By the year 2000, only 55.9% of the U.S. population will be white, decreasing from 75.5% in 1980 (Lichter, 1989). "Changing demographies and the new immigrations are making the phenomenon of pluralism inescapable in this country" (Greene, 1993, p. 13). In preparing future teachers, how are Colleges of Education responding to this reality?

"U.S. society is becoming more and more culturally pluralistic, but such is not the case with regard to the campuses

of most U.S. universities" (Garcia & Pugh, 1992). Lack of diversity in universities is clear both among faculty and students. Like the faculty, most students enrolled in teacher education programs have little knowledge of the concept of diversity, either cultural or otherwise. They have lived, for the most part, in communities where diversity has not been a characteristic of their personal experiences, have attended schools where cultural diversity was never addressed, and do not perceive diversity as a significant variable in their preparation to teach.

Colleges of education should take the lead in establishing programs that address diversity which would include the changing demographics of the population as well as the individual concerns of students from a variety of backgrounds. Allowing future educators to remain in their isolated world does not prepare them for their future as professional educators. As Perry & Fraser (1993) have pointed out, because of the inherent power in the position, " . . . the teacher must play the key role in allowing the lives, histories, and cultures of the historically oppressed to critically influence the reconceptualization of knowledge that is represented in the curriculum and the classroom" (p. 19).

Collaboration

Years ago, teachers were trained in teacher training institutes. As teacher training became more associated with higher education, there appeared to be a separation of the

student in preparation to teach from the reality of the classroom. In the last decade, reform reports (Carnegie Forum, 1986 and The Holmes Group, 1986) have recommended a closer link between schools and universities. Irvin (1990) strongly purposed a collaborative approach to preparing teachers for the future. He argued that " . . . the most promising approach in the present environment is collaboration between K-12 educators and university faculties" (p. 624).

A model for integrating cultural diversity experiences into teacher preparation curriculum was designed by establishing a collaborative partnership between the University of Central Florida and a local elementary school.

The University/School Partnership

In 1990, the University of Central Florida (UCF), College of Education, initiated an agreement with the Seminole County School Board to establish a working partnership to begin studying the problems of educating "at-risk" students at one specific partnership school (i.e., Midway Elementary School). In addition to providing student interns to the school, one section of an Educational Foundations course is scheduled on the Midway Elementary campus. Students enrolled in the UCF course serve as tutors for Midway students, and the tutors are supervised collaboratively by a UCF professor and the Midway Elementary faculty.

The Structured Learning Experience

Midway Elementary is a Chapter I school located in Central Florida, and it can be characterized as serving a primarily African-American community in which the majority of the families are economically disadvantaged and eligible for a variety of family and social services. Approximately 80% of the Midway students are from families who are living at or below the poverty level, and about 80% of the children are of minority status. The community of Midway is experiencing numerous environmental and societal problems. These problems include inadequate sewer and drainage facilities, lack of water service to residences, unpaved roads, and no sidewalks. Midway also has experienced an increase in crime which is particularly associated with drug use and drug trafficking.

UCF students who enrolled in the "Midway Partnership" section of the Educational Foundations course actually attend their university class on the Midway campus thus they come face to face with some manifestations of the environment in the Midway community. These UCF students work with the Midway Elementary School teachers in all aspects of the school. They also tutor individual students, work with small groups, and, in some cases, may conduct units of study in classrooms. The UCF professor who teaches the Educational Foundations course also works with the Midway faculty, attends parent conferences and faculty meetings, and meets regularly with the school administrators. Additionally, this professor goes into the classrooms and

supervises the UCF students, often interacting with both the Midway students as well as the UCF students.

The Journal Writing Learning Experience

Students who are enrolled in the Educational Foundations course are required to keep a personal journal. The use of the journal writing experience is designed to encourage reflective thinking, and to accentuate personal attitudes, beliefs, and affective reactions to their learning experiences.

Over a period of two semesters, the journals of the fifty-four students who participated in the partnership classes were collected and with the students' permission, the writings analyzed. Before the UCF students are placed in the classrooms at Midway Elementary, they are asked to ponder this new experience and write about their concerns and expectations in their journal. The major themes that emerged from analysis of these initial journal writings were anxiety, fear, resentment, and frustration. The anxiety and fear centered on feeling unprepared to deal with students, beliefs about the students being difficult and uncontrollable, and concerns about the inability to interact with the students in an appropriate manner. The inconvenience of leaving the college campus was the focus of resentment comments. Some students also expressed frustration at a lack of experience with diversity as well as realizing their own prejudice regarding what the students would be like and how they would behave.

On the positive side was the expressed belief by one UCF student that as pre-service teachers "We really need to learn to interact with and teach students who are not like the ones we are used to being with and with whom we feel comfortable. I am looking forward to this experience because I know I need it and believe it will make me a better teacher."

Toward the end of the experience at Midway, students were asked to reflect on the experience and to write journal entries regarding how their attitudes had changed. Overwhelmingly, the expressions were toward a positive view of teaching and working with "at risk" students.

One example of the types of student responses was a journal entry where the experience was described as a transition from concern that "things aren't the way they used to be" to a concern about "what can be done today with things as they are?" The student reflected that "circumstances do not appear to be improving, but they won't get better until we understand the learning process in children and work with the children we have!"

Identified Themes

Thirteen major themes were identified in synthesizing the student reactions to the Midway course and tutoring experience. The student writing demonstrated:

1) appreciation of the experience and of these elementary students' courage in facing tremendous odds against them;

2) realization of the time and effort that is needed to prepare to teach these students;

3) increased confidence and feeling better prepared for actually becoming teachers;

4) desire to work with exceptional children and a more positive attitude toward working with students from low socioeconomic status families;

5) a new appreciation of the impact of the children's home life and overall life experience on their school functioning;

6) increased respect for students and awareness of the need to learn from the children;

7) the importance of a positive and enthusiastic attitude toward teaching, learning, and students;

8) insight not to judge a child by appearance or to categorize the child by the first interaction;

9) the realization that a personal preference has developed to avoid teaching at the elementary school level;

10) the perception that all students may not have equal chances to develop fully and get the best education;

11) the need to focus on the individual child and to suspend preconceived ideas which focus on children as groups;

12) shock at the level of knowledge children have regarding life issues, such as sex and violence, and the degree to which their experiences and attitude reflect those usually associated with adolescents; and

13) a deepened desire to become a teacher and especially to be the best teacher possible.

Specific statements written by students and shared here with their permission illustrate the intensity with which the Midway experience impacted them. Specifically, students wrote comments such as: 1) "I learned to appreciate each child for who they are and to look for the good in each one." 2) "When I came in, I saw them as a third grade class, and now I see each one as a unique and special individual." 3) "More than anything else, this experience has deepened my desire to be a teacher and increased the responsibility I feel to be the best teacher I can possibly be." 4) "Education is not fair for all students and they may not have a chance to develop fully and get a good education.

Conclusions

Until pre-service teachers are adequately prepared for the diversity which they will face in the classroom of today, teacher education institutions have not fulfilled their mission. "Teacher education institutions themselves must take responsibility for their current reputations as laggards rather than leaders of educational reform" (Fullan, 1993, p. 14). Today's teachers must not only be prepared to deal with the schools as they are today, but they must be flexible and resourceful in dealing with the radical and continuous improvements needed for the future of quality education.

The tremendous need to revise the present monocultural approach to teacher education has been documented and continually recounted by numerous writers in all major professional education journals. Students can be brought into the mainstream of education only when we provide the richest experiences in schools that are reflections of the student's experiences, culture, and community (Brandt, 1992). The question of importance seems to be "how can we provide schooling that relates to the diversity of the student population when the reality is that the majority of teacher education students are 'white with a white experience'?" The key to the above question becomes one of developing a true appreciation for diversity with which teacher-education students can personally identify. Whereas bringing this reality into the college classroom could be one way, it would seem that intense personal impact is achieved through a field-based approach in which students are emersed into a culture which is different from their own. "In order to provide schooling relevant to the lives of students, teachers need a sense of the child's world view" (Pang & Nieto, 1992, p. 26). When teacher education students go out into the world of today's children where they not only experience the child but also experience the context in which those children are growing and developing (i.e., as experienced in the Midway project), these future teachers are likely to develop a new appreciation and awareness of students as

individuals and understand the importance of diversity to a quality learning environment.

Cultural Diversity

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